

Wayne Madsen interview 12/15/08 For Lift Off
Jenny De La Cruz and Sally Sumida

Jenny: I was able to look at some of your work and I was trying to get a better understanding for what you were trying to do, and please correct me if I am wrong, that you were interested in Technology and communication and how it is disseminated to people through the mass media and how it can be manipulated?

Wayne: To give a little history, since I don't have an artist's statement on my site, I come from a psychology/sociology background. I studied it as an undergraduate. I started in the arts then I left it because it wasn't fulfilling what I wanted to do. I went into psychology/sociology, got a bachelor's in that, then came back for a bachelor's in art because I found ways to deal with my psych/soc interests through the arts. So a lot of my projects turn out to be experiments in the pseudo-scientific method, which is what I was trained in, but I am looking back on that in a critical way. How can we evaluate the sciences, especially the social sciences? How do they relate to themselves, how do they relate to the broader community and in the same way how do the arts function relative to the broader community as well as the internal community? So that got me thinking. Most of my projects now deal with the connection between inner groups and outer groups in societies and communities. There are language boundaries, social boundaries, norms – all these things I learned about in psychology. But I found there wasn't sufficient effort put into qualitative information. They were more focused on statistics, numbers. A lot of the critical theory in the social sciences has been debating whether or not that is helpful and what it means, so I am taking a step back and saying from an artistic practice how can we approach this and talk about it in a constructive way that analyzes what it's done to our society and what we do to it. A lot of my works deal with that and that's the history of dealing with communication, language. I approach all these subjects keeping in mind sociology, psychology, communities, interpersonal relationships, those kinds of issues.

Sally: Could we speak specifically about The Prisoner's Dilemma?

W: All right. So my ATC project. I approached that project originally because I was trying to deal with the military in contemporary culture, a proliferation of military interests whether they be conflicts with what we view as the common good, or a conflicting interest with what we as a community, an American society, believe is just or right. But looking at my past psychology background, Stanley Milgram and several other studies that have been done, show that humans in a similar position end up doing the exact same things. So I wondered about the relationship between games, video games, the military industrial complex and ultimately torture itself. You can view it as being a bad thing but is it a part of our nature or simply something that we do whether we are conscious of it or not. I wanted to make that a focus of my dialogue. I wanted to talk about groups, their multiple interactions and how they play out in a fun, interactive way. The other side of my work, what I have called in the past "scientistic," in other words scientific authority applied to the arts, not real science but having the image of science in the arts. But the other side is that....I've lost my train of thought...

S: Are you familiar with Zimbardo's study at Stanford? (This was a psychology experiment where Stanford students were divided into two groups: prison guard and prisoners. With a short period of time the students playing prison guards were actually torturing the students in the role of prisoners. Zimbardo had to stop the experiment.)

W: Yeah, exactly. Artur Zmijewski, a Polish artist, you can look up his work, his work recently has been focused on re-creation, like that of the Stanford prison experiment. I only found out about his work after I started on my project, but I felt there are good parallels between his approach to recreating in order to play out things.

W: This is what the project did. The prisoner's dilemma: two people are placed in a situation where they have a choice, either to protect themselves at the expense of someone else or sacrifice themselves for the good of the other person. Both of them have the same option so it is how that dynamic plays out. There are varying models of that. What I was actually portraying in my work was a turn-based prisoner's dilemma so one person has the chance to either save themselves or sacrifice themselves and then they switch so the second person is responding to what the first person has done. Generally they go back and forth. Sometimes there is concurrence so both are making choices at the same time.

S: So your set up was more like a dialogue.

W: In our daily life it is generally more accurate to say that the decisions we make are in response to how people have previously treated us. And everyday we have these small prisoner's dilemmas to deal with.

S: And we make a conscious decision regarding how to respond?

W: Exactly. So I wanted to play that out. So I had one person who was playing a video game. They had on a helmet and ran around this space. The video game is essentially: do you dodge the bullet or get hit by it. That's all it is. The player does not get any kind of a physical impact from the bullet. It is just video game dynamics, which you wouldn't think was all that compelling. But the partner that is sitting in a chair with an armband strapped on. They are the one who gets hurt if you dodge a bullet. They receive a little electric shock. It feels a cat scratch. It was developed out of a little electronic hand buzzer. The way it played out was the player could either dodge the bullet or get hit without any physical charge. But the partner sitting would get an electric shock if the player dodged the bullet. It was so compelling to people to play the video game and to win that they stopped thinking about their partner. They just shocked the other person silly. And then they switched back and forth.

S: So did you find there was a correlation between the person who dodged the bullet and shocked their partner and the subsequent response from the partner?

W: In almost every case, no. What it all came down to was what did the person want to get out of the relationship, the inner dynamic between the two people. One person was

seated, his friend shocked him a couple times, he eventually said he was done and ripped off the armband. When they switched places, after experiencing that pain, his response was just to stand still and get hit by the bullets and save his partner who had shocked him. So he became more compassionate in response to his partner's lack of compassion. The majority of people were interested in having fun and that involved running around and experimenting with a video game interface. I am making a lot of extrapolations that quite possibly couldn't be true so for me it is more important for me to deal with how video games work.

W: I remember what the other crux was. The other important part of my artwork practice is that I'm not so much interested in creating a piece of art. What I am interested in doing is what I call framework, developing a system through which non-artists, those not defined as contemporary artists, will be the ones who are making the art and having the dialogue along the way in the gallery setting. Programmers and others who wouldn't consider themselves to be artists in any way are the ones who went through the project and built it and executed it. The system is set up for them to do this. That's where I come in as the artist, with authorship of the system. How can I develop this experiment where these two outside groups, the "artists" and the "non-artists," interact?

S: So you see yourself as a facilitator? You set up the environment or a situation and you see how it unfolds?

W: Right. Those are good words...which is essentially what a social scientist does. They set up an experiment that will attempt to prove their hypothesis. This goes back to why I think my work goes better in an art setting. I am not interested in [the hypothesis as a directing force] because I view that as being counterproductive to the advancement of understanding. The hypothesis you set up is laden with biases. You collect your data... Freakonomics (NY Times bestseller) approached data from a bizarre angle. A national drop in crime was [originally] seen as a result in new police methods. [The authors of Freakonomics] looked at it from the angle of: a rise in abortions led to a decrease in a potentially criminal population, which led to a decrease in crime.

S: They were looking at social and historical context instead of just the data?

W: Right. My point is looking at the data through the lens of the hypothesis biases the results. I'm interested in having no [limiting] hypothesis; I am approaching a framework, I am seeing what unfolds and in the end I'm not interested in the data or the correlations, I'm just interested in developing the experience and whatever comes of that is great. I'm not trying to publish my results. It's really fun.

S: But in some way do you evaluate the process for yourself?

W: I try to find out what worked and what didn't which is similar.

S: Do you come up with conclusions?

W: I'm interested in furthering those ideas, how can I get a better reaction from people, not an observer reaction but a participation reaction. Which is tough to do in this artwork where you get a certain crowd that is coming through the gallery. When they approach this artwork, it doesn't cater to a static and solitary art viewing experience. I'm trying to make it an experience where they become a part of it and go through it and they start to question what was it that just happened. That's what I'm trying to perfect and I really think I am so far away from it.

W: I don't associate myself with Joseph Beuys although I see a connection. I see a better connection with Pierre Huyghe although we are dealing with different mediums. I see his approach of trying to evaluate a qualitative experience as relating to mine. In the *Third Memory*, the *Ghost No Shell* and particularly *Snow White*, he is trying to study this but he comes to no conclusions and it brings up more questions than it does conclusions.

S: But it makes you aware of the underlying process that you might not have thought about and in *The Third Memory* he's talking about how the fictionalized version of the event becomes part of the memory of the actual event so eventually there is no hierarchy between the actual bank robbery and the fictionalization of it and the participant's re-creation of it.

W: I think there are three different memories that are fit in a triangle: the original, the movie and the third recreation and how it functions. The piece is at SFMOMA right now as part of the Participation exhibition until February. It is an amazing work. Also Sam Gould, who I worked with last summer, his work is in a totally different vein but he is doing something similar where he is not interested in visual participation of the piece but the interaction that occurs. The artist collective Red 76 has done several works which deal with creating a localized and ephemeral soup kitchen, a place to have chats. The piece we worked on together for the ZERO1 2008 festival was a Second Life recreation of an anarchist society; but instead of recreating the society, we recreated the social structure for the society so it could build itself. So the people involved aren't the usual set of artists. A lot of it comes with my own concerns with where things have gone since Greenbergian theory and how far away we've gotten from making a connection to real life, contemporary experience. I worry about how I can talk to my non-art friends about art and they have no clue as to what it means or how it relates to life and to me that is the antithesis of how art should work.

S: Do you have a more Utopian view as to the role art should serve in society?

W: Yeah. I feel like art can't be so isolated from society. It can't be sitting in a studio producing something and if that's what it is, I really don't want a part of it because it loses touch with what people are feeling and granted, I'm not trying to say that artists aren't people. That's the Sarah Palin approach that only the small town inhabitants are real people. Artists are in these communities and are real people too. There is so much more to life out there. My brother is a quantum physicist and granted that's an isolated community. He and I are working on a project on ion traps. That is interesting to me to get isolated communities to finally interact in ways they hadn't before.

S: Is that your rationale or motivation for using things from popular culture in your work?

W: Yes. I never thought of that. Someone else asked: why do you use alternative realities, fictional settings? Maybe it's just a part of my own experience. I still haven't figured out why I use these popular references. Originally I did a lot of oil paintings. A lot of them dealt with symbols. At the end of undergrad and beginning of grad work I started using a lot of symbols. I picked up the *Symbol Source Book* [by Henry Dreyfuss] from 1978, the same book that Basquiat and Haring used in their work. I was influenced by their work. They were using them mainly for a visual aesthetic, graffiti. I noticed that the symbols are coming from many different, non-art related disciplines. This was the start of reading about how pre-language and post-language affects us. I became fascinated by how the symbols could not be read by people outside of the disciplines for which they were intended. For example a symbol for a crop of hay. There are hundreds of different varieties. We look at them and can't distinguish between them. I found very loaded symbols to use that can be read different ways but only within those disciplines would you know their precise meanings. For example, two guys holding a box is meant to symbolize heavy weight – “use two people to lift the box” – but instead it looks like two legs, a stick body, a head and an appendage coming out of the body. The two are facing each other so it is a very homoerotic image. I put them in paintings. They would have meaning to certain people but not to the rest of us. Then I incorporated cute culture images in my paintings: Mario images, things stolen from different internet sites and cutesy but creepy images like the sexualization of Pikachu. What is our love affair with these icons and does it extend past simple childlike love and what does that even mean? I like them too. There are times when I wish I could go back to painting but I don't have the time. I am so busy doing my other work. These paintings I could crank out two to three in a few 70-hour work weeks. They are massive paintings. I felt like painting was a dead end street. There is only so much I could do regarding these experiments. It was still a one-on-one meditative viewer experience, so I was trying to get past that. I moved on to other things. I'm not opposed to painting. In a way I feel like my “Pirates of the Caribbean” video is a painting, but not one that was done by me, but one that was facilitated which I like a lot better.

W: *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a project that I am currently working on. Disney made a DVD of the movie. On that disc is software that doesn't let you copy that information. It prevents copying. The code was designed to stop pirating. However today, in 2008, if you want to copy any commercial DVD, you go online and download any copy software, then you are able to copy it. Hackers have cracked the code. If Disney puts out a new DVD with a newer version of anti-pirate [DRM] on their new DVDs, it only stumps hackers/pirates for about two weeks. Millions of dollars are put into the protection software but it can be cracked so easily. So in today's world, it's so easy to pirate a DVD. What I'm doing is seeing what happens when I copy the dvd without the cracking software so I see what the scrambling is doing to the original image. I disable the pirates' potency but I still look at what the DVD looks like scrambled. But the scrambled mess is so visually appealing. It's the same data but it is not put together in a way that you can make a coherent image out of it. So what this shows us is there is a visual software

[written by DRM anti-pirates] that is never meant to be seen. Pirates easily crack it. The commercial copiers don't show it to you but it is so compelling and interesting that I am showing it to people. I am pointing to what they make together, this beautiful, crazy, scrambled code. And I am working with the idea of pirates and pirating. When I saw the movie in the theater the first advertisement was a public service announcement where an actor says don't pirate films because pirating hurts me. At the end of the film the characters say that perhaps some forms of pirating are for the common good after all. "Pirates of the Caribbean" is one of the most pirated DVDs in the world. What an irony.

W: What I am currently working on, which I hope will be my MFA show, relates to Wikipedia.org. To me what is really interesting is not what is on Wikipedia but what isn't, what people as a community removed from it. People go in all the time and delete things. That is put into a massive dump of deleted files and entries that are saved. I will be using that information. I and other programmers will use some natural language processing algorithms to rebuild an entire Wikipedia based on what was deleted. The 'not wikipedia'. I will have to develop a whole Wikipedia server that you can go through and search but it will be built on what Wikipedia is getting rid of. A lot of it will look exactly the same as the real thing with false information. It will have the same structure. There have been several projects already done based on that kind of deleted information. Most are too literal and don't deal with what it means to have a community develop this kind of information. As much as what the information is, it is more important that we know what the community rejects and puts outside of itself. It goes back to my original statement of what is and what is not, and what is happening between the two groups. So I am trying to develop the alternative Wikipedia. I will write a computer program that develops a Wikipedia based on a negation. All the good names are taken but I am looking for a good name I can buy to describe this.

J: With your more recent work, are you saying you are not setting up an experiment, you are setting up a framework?

W: I don't like the idea of an experiment. Ethan [Miller] calls it code. I call it a framework. It is a filter you place and your authorship is not what is falling through but how things are falling through. What's falling through is ultimately the end product. That to me is really interesting.

S: What do you want people to come away with when they participate in your facilitated experiment?

W: I'm still trying to come up a good answer to that. The artist and art communities are secluded groups so I want the people who interface with the project to come away thinking this is artwork that was not necessarily made by artists but by engineers. What does this mean and how I can I better relate to these other communities outside of my area, the people who are a part of the project? I had people get together and build a ten foot by ten foot giant PVC pipe cubes. They are simple to put together. The non-artists get to build it and then they say they never thought about art this way but here it is. I created this. Does that make me an artist? What role does the artist and the arts have in

society? It is a poor and threatened role. We did this to ourselves through Greenbergian theory and distancing ourselves from the common experience. Zmijewski talks about how to remedy the situation. I'd like to see us engage more outside of ourselves. This is one way to do it. An artist began in 60's and 70's cleaning museums (Mierle Laderman Ukeles). Now she sets up residencies for herself in trash sites and she does projects at dumps. I like this work because it isn't for the artist or the art community. She is getting outside of it. I'd like to see my work go more in that direction.

W: I get nervous when people like Joseph Beuys say everything is art and everyone is an artist. We have art schools across the nation that are churning out artists because of creativity which everyone has. I don't want to be an elitist about art but on the other hand I don't want everyone saying I am making art so you have no livelihood. So there is a reason why I study and think about these things. I am not interested in empowering the common man to make art. I am interested more in having them look at the arts and talk about them more. It's more about integrating that into common everyday experience rather than empowering the individual person. Science is very much an entrenched Enlightenment belief. It's Aristotelian: the scientific method, experiments, observations and data which I want to move beyond. I don't know why we hang onto that. There are other approaches we could use but we don't because we still hold so closely to Enlightenment ideas.

J: I think you still are conducting experiments because you are setting up a framework but you are limiting people's choices within it. I am wondering if you have any expectations while you are developing this framework?

W: I do. You are absolutely right. As I develop my work I plan on addressing that. You are pointing to what may be a flaw in my pieces. I am interested in how much this work really relates to the experimental method and how much are my anticipations playing into it. I want to embrace the biases and expectations of the people who are developing the work because that will help me show that these things exist. I don't know if I'm trying to break away from so much as getting us to look at it. I think a lot of people take the scientific method for granted instead of questioning it. One of the things that was pointed out to me by one of my professors was the scientific method is a philosopher's dilemma. It is a philosopher's paradigm, not a scientific paradigm. There is no way to prove that it actually works. You can't prove it with itself. So there is a very interesting friction that happens that you are pointing out excellently and I don't know that we have a better solution but I would definitely like to make us more aware of it. So I think you are right, I am conducting experiments and the one thing I am lacking is collecting data and maybe if I collected data I might find that it would improve the project.

J: I think you are collecting data and that data is the people's experience. That's what I saw.

W: To talk about that, it is important to note that data for me means numbers. You are correct that qualitative data is still data. To the science community quantitative data is all that matters. I am absolutely interested in qualitative data such as case studies, the videos

from the experience, what's written down afterward.

S: Do you document what happens?

W: Yes. Without documentation it doesn't exist. But I am bad at it. As a graduate student I have tried to get better at that. Andy Goldsworthy, Cory Archangel, James Turrell are some of my favorite artists. They deal with the ephemeral in the sense that documentation is just that. The documents are beautiful but they are not the art.